DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 017 CS 212 303

AUTHOR Miller, Lori Ann
TITLE Women Writers Evoke the Muse: A Mythic Perspective.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (41st, Chicago, IL, March 22-24, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consciousness Raising; *Creative Writing; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; *Mythology; Rhetorical Invention; Self Concept; Writing Instruction; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Archetypes; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A creative writing class explored the feminine creative powers evoked when searching for the Muse in an attempt to understand women as writers. Female student writers occasionally found "masculine" figures, but predominantly experienced a figure of the Muse that had a distinctly Goddess-linked quality or was not genderized at all. Accessing these inner figures seemed to address the relationship the woman writers had to themselves and to their work, allowing them to access a uniquely "feminine" version of the Muse and to express themselves in a voice of feminine authority that moved far beyond the expression of "just" feelings. The female writers uncovered in themselves the mysterious multiplicity of the ancient Goddesses and, with this discovery, gave themselves permission to speak. Aphrodite, the remembered union of the one with all things, was the genesis, the beginning of the process. Artemis urged an uncovering of the ways for women to become self-defined, to become women-centered writers. Athena articulated and integrated, bringing meaningfulness and vision to the experience of the One. The knowledge and experience of these mythic aspects of the feminine principle were only the beginning, immersing the women writers in this extraordinary cycle. The authentic, dynamic, creative, and uniquely female figures of the Goddesses, when directly experienced, empowered the young women to view themselves as Woman and, hence, to write as whole and autonomous human beings. (Forty-eight references are attached.) (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED318017

WOMEN WRITERS EVOKE THE MUSE:

A MYTHIC PERSPECTIVE

Lori Ann Miller
4C's Convention
Chicago, 1990

CS212303

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
LORI ANN MILLER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PANEL: WOMEN'S WAYS OF WRITING: SELF CONCEPT, AUTHORITY, CREATIVE AUTONOMY

Women Writers Evoke the Muse: A Mythic Perspective

Lori Miller

Certainly, a necessary element in helping women writers engage in the act of "constructed" knowledge (Belenky, et al., 1986) is to give them information. Women continue to work against both socially imposed and internalized negative descriptions of the feminine which we have not yet been able to dismantle. Even today, the feminine is considered passive, emotional, or receptive -- Woman is the moon, the darkness, and the unknown. These traditional associations with the feminine, particularly when it comes to talking about meaningful differences in the writing or learning process that we may attribute to gender, must be persistently examined and reconstituted.

Since our culture is still deeply entrenched in Freudian perspectives, we may, ourselves, unconsciously perpetuate Freud's suspicion of the feminine, including the negative attribution and projection of any number of "feminine" traits, and a good amount of misogyny, unless we consciously update our attitudes toward our women students and toward ourselves, as women. The Freudian world view is simply too limited to account for the dynamic richness of dreams, for the ongoing urges for growth, and for the evolution of consciousness in the individual. I don't mean to say that Freud was wrong; I think, rather, that his brilliant models of the human psyche are extraordinarily insightful, but pertain only to the personal unconscious and

to childhood issues. As such, Freud's models are very dangerously limiting -- even destructive -- to women.

When we move beyond Freud to explore those unconscious mental components that give rise to symbols, to spirituality, and to imagination, we move to the "mythic" level of the unconscious, a level of mind understood as containing contents that go far beyond the personal unconscious as detailed by Freud. This Jungian description of the unconscious, one that includes a "collective" aspect, is complicated by Jung's notable lapses in describing the "animus" (the masculine part of the woman's unconscious) in almost entirely negative terms (Mattoon and Jones, 1989). Yet, as I will explain, it is this more "mythic" perspective that empowers all of us to move beyond genderized dichotomies, and to strive for wholeness and autonomy as human beings. I think that Jung knew, well enough, that he had but begun to explore the nature of the deep unconscious (Jung, 1958). And I think that what he identifies as the "animus" remains a useful description of something real in the woman's unconscious, if it is placed in proper perspective. But I think that Jung failed to make some important distinctions that could explain the significant power of the archetypal "feminine first principles," when these are activated, and their power to recontextualize the issues carried by the shadow and animus level aspects of the woman's unconscious. What women writers can use to empower themselves as writers are, then, those "myths" of the feminine -- found in images that lie hidden in the depths of

the unconscious as potentialities -- because it is these that present an accurate picture of the female principle's extraordinary connectedness, intelligence, autonomy, and wisdom, and the fertile creative powers that arise when we make direct contact with these unconscious elements. Women writers must, now, discover the Goddesses.

I am, at best, uneasy with Jungians who associate the Goddesses with genderized traits like "feelings, hunches, affections," or the ability to "get in touch with our feelings" (Bruteau, 69). These definitions only perpetuate negative stereotypes of the feminine. What we need to provide for our women students is a direct experience, not of the ancient worship of outmoded forms of the Goddess, but a direct and evolving presence of the eternal Feminine now. But how might we proceed? We need to do something more than tell our women students that the Goddess was once a powerful force in culture, and to present descriptions of the Greek goddesses (Bolen, 1984). We need to get to Her essences, to trace what there was in those ancient, paleofeminine forms that continues to inform our growth today.

To "return" to the Goddess is not to go back in time, then, but to go forward into our own unconscious minds, and to invite our students to explore these uncharted waters with us. We must explore the different aspects of the feminine we experience, and embrace the multitude of images that begin to emerge from contact with the inner feminine. There are hints in the records of the Greeks, but we must construct these Goddesses according to our contemporary

wisdom and inner experience. The return to the Goddess has traditionally represented a reunification. Kerenyi and others have argued that the root meaning of femininity is a "dynamic unity of the one and the many, a process in which the one ever becomes the many and the many are ever reunited with the one" (Bruteau, 72). This description of the process of the psyche's movement from feelings of oneness to ideas of separateness expresses the essential quality of the principle I am trying to name, here. Only a dynamic definition of the feminine can help us to move beyond the dichotomies traditionally associated with all things "feminine." The feminine is not opposed to the masculine, but is the source, the bridge that connects us, and the insight that brings us back from our separateness and makes us "whole." Ultimately, the feminine principle engages us in the task of gaining a unified vision of the meaning of the whole of life. Kerenyi (1969) suggests that the feminine synthesizes what has been learned by the "masculine" as it seeks a separately identified self, integrates that learning, and incorporates the richness it has gained from the experience. I would agree with this dynamic description of the feminine, although I question whether that which seeks "separateness" is best imaged as the "masculine" animus, in the female unconscious.

In creative writing classes specifically designed to explore a variety of "inner figures" made accessible through the kind of "poetic reverie" described by Bachelard (1969), some of my students and I asked ourselves which qualities of

the "feminine" were associated with creativity. These groups were comprised mainly of women, although several men also attended. What we set out to do, as a group, involved consciously going in search of those "imagined" aspects of ourselves that might help us in exploring our voices and our various "selves" as writers, and in articulating what it is that we have to say. These writers and myself thus set out to explore the relatively unknown territory of the unconscious mind so far as that was available to us through meditation and dream work, through journal work, and through intuition. We worked to "recover" the "dismembered" parts of ourselves, and, by re-membering those, to become more conscious and more whole, as human beings (Hillman, 1979).

Because of the unique components that contributed to the make-up of this particular group of writers, I think that what I have to contribute here today is not a recommendation for ways to teach a creative writing class. My purpose, instead, is to describe the direct experiences of feminine creative powers that were evoked when we set out in search of the Muse, and to ask whether these represent an evolution of our understanding of women as writers. Perhaps, then, we can lay a foundation for understanding something more about women, and about creativity itself, that will help us to explore gender differences in more traditional classroom settings.

I had suggested to my students that the experience of the Muse may be archetypal, and introduced readings from poets who directly address the presence of the Muse. We

read from Milton, from Coleridge, Keats and Shelley, from Robert Browning, Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and from contemporary poets like Juan Ramon Jiminez, Denise Levertov, W.S. Merwin, Margaret Atwood, H.D., Adrienne Rich, Deena Metzger, May Sarton, and Anne Sexton, to name a few. As we "imaged" the Muse figures which came into view from a close reading of these poets, we began to wonder whether the women writers in the group would find "masculine" Muse figures as uniformly as the males (both the poets and the men in the group) regularly experienced inner guidance in a traditionally "feminine" Muse figure. Archetypal psychologists would posit a masculine Muse for women. But the women poets cued us to look for unusual differences across the genders -- differences that were caused by more than the simplistic opposition of "masculine" and "feminine."

We went in search of the Muse by learning to put the "rational mind" on hold and journeying within to that dream-like world where characters with powerful, seemingly autonomous voices and ideas leapt forth into our consciousnesses. What we discovered was that while the men in our group always projected or "uncovered" voices of inspiration that were distinctly feminine, the women writers in the group had a much wider variety of responses. The women writers found "masculine" figures occasionally, but were more likely to experience a figure of the Muse that had a distinctly Goddess-linked quality or was not genderized at all. Women found dragons, waterfalls, dwarfs, veiled

saviors, and great goddesses. They found old crones and disembodied, floating balls of light. They found figures so diverse in form that it was difficult to categorize them. And yet, as we worked with these figures over time, we found that those which returned and inspired us were, indeed, related to an authentic creative urge. The inner Muse figures uncovered by the women writers had specific information, and often inspired or urged the writer to continue, to examine unexamined feelings, to forgive or to forget the past. Their Muses were generally affirming, sometimes stern figures who inspired both awe and respect from the women who experienced them. But why were the Muse figures of the women more rich and varied than the men's?

A key came from one woman, who experienced a spontaneous vision of the Goddess Athena while the rest of us were engaged in a writing exercise one day. It was not, she thought, a "return" to a concept of that Goddess figure so much as it was a direct, conscious experience of her own accumulated inner wisdom in the clear form of the Goddess Athena. The inner vision of the Goddess was potent, and as the woman shared this experience with the rest of us, it also became clear that the woman truly understood what had been holding her back. Athena "appeared" to her, in a sudden and awesome moment of clarity, and soon after, she began to write. Since the women's experiences of the Muse were not dissimilar to the men's (the Muse is often feminine across genders, but women more often find more figures), we decided to explore the possibility that the feminine

principle itself is innately linked to the creative process. Does creative writing require an invocation of the feminine?

As I worked with the various inner figures of the women writers, it occurred to me that several kinds of feminine "first principles" were involved. The women regularly identified themselves with the issues associated with Athena, Artemis, or Aphrodite. From these insights, we determined to seek their aboriginal forms as archetypes. The Greek Goddess Athena served as the representative of Greek civilization -- but this is corrupted! In her earlier forms, in paleofeminine times (Eisler, 1988), she may well have carried the image of power and wisdom we now associate with the masculine. Thus, by witnessing what my women writers experienced in their inner worlds, a vision of the psychic processes involved when women writers write -- psychic processes imaged by the emerging goddess archetypes -- began to formulate itself. She begins in the earth, in the essence of union (Aphrodite) and comes forth, not from her father's head (a patriarchal contamination), but from the First Principle of Creation, Mother Earth, or Gaia Herself. In forming or coming to consciousness, Woman separates from the Great Mother, from the aboriginal union. As an emerging self, she explores and articulates her separateness, becoming Artemis, the woman alone, she who knows her own power and mystery only as she connects to herSelf and relates to the elements, to nature, and to the Other. When she has thus moved out into the world of form, and has experienced her power, she assimilates and

integrates what she has gathered from Nature, from the world at large, and analyzes the experience in the aspect of Athena, wisdom.

As I see it, then, several of my women writers' Muse figures were descendants of this first, great triad, this archetypal memory of the Goddess that begins in oneness, unity, and love, experiences separateness, and then uses that experience, now coupled with wisdom, to reunite herself with herSelf, to become whole. The urge for oneness and for separateness are both embodied in the great Goddess archetypes. Accessing these inner figures seemed to address the relationship the woman writer has to herself and to her work. Its coming became an event, even a celebration. My women writers and I discovered, in our experiences of the Muse, that we have an extraordinary and powerful inner richness. This discovery seemed to enable the women to write. It allowed them to access a uniquely "feminine" version of the Muse, and to express themselves in a voice of feminine authority that moved far beyond the expression of "just" feelings. In its infinite variety, it enabled us to take on voices that were at once authoritative and feminine. Perhaps most importantly, the quality of these inner figures was so rich and compelling that the women began to find themselves "full" of things to write, and voices to speak in. They began to feel energized, enthusiastic, and inspired. This led me to believe that experiencing the archetypes, themselves, is the real point of the process of going in search of the Goddesses within.

With the emergence of each new inner figure, we found a current of richness in our writing, a belief in ourselves as Creators, as bearers of a Sacred History. We learned that our inner worlds are rich, varied, and powerful. We learned to recognize our own cycles. We also learned to respect those inner voices, when they came, and to follow their suggestions. We learned that we are many women, and that we create. We learned that our differing "selves" have differing perspectives about life's ebbs and flows and its ultimate meanings. And we learned, perhaps, to begin to trust ourselves a little more. Hence, we "constructed" a world in which our inner lives and their contents held the power to articulate a world view that was entirely dependent on our own autonomous sense of Self.

The Muse is not available on request. It has its own sense of what needs to be done and when. May Sarton's muse, in the following lines, seems familiar to us, and presents a haunting "call." Here, the Muse is a phantom, a voice which calls her and which she, in response, entreats:

Blurred as though it has been woken
From an underground and secret river,
This voice itself and not the language spoken
Has made the air around me shiver.

Seductive sound, mysterious chord
That speaks its message in the very timbre
And not in a to-be-deciphered word
That I might hunt down or remember.

It wanders through my dreams and there I learn
I have to make the journey, have to go,
Whatever I must change or overturn
To reach the source, so strong this undertow.